

## Physical Appearance, Sex, and Skin Complexion: Factors in Employability

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### ABSTRACT

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This study investigated the influence of physical appearance, sex, and skin complexion on employability among 100 graduates and 4 HR officers in Naga City, Philippines. The study employed a mixed research methodology utilizing a descriptive-correlational and phenomenological design through a questionnaire and focus group discussion. Results revealed that 89% of the participants considered physical attractiveness as a vital factor for employment, particularly in public-facing roles like teaching and customer service. While skin complexion was largely deemed not important, sex-role perceptions varied, remaining significant in traditionally gendered occupations like automotive mechanics. Notably, female participants rated physical attractiveness as more critical than their male counterparts did. Despite efforts towards SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality), these biases persist, potentially hindering equitable employment access, thus weakening these vital goals. Statistical analysis further confirmed no significant age-based differences in these perceptions, suggesting that appearance-based biases are culturally embedded across generational groups. Consequently, the study recommends the A.S.P.I.R.E. (Authentic Self Program for Inclusive Recruitment & Employment) Career Guidance Program to empower students by emphasizing skills and competencies over physical attributes to foster professional self-worth.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study is one of very few studies which have investigated physical attractiveness, sex roles, and skin complexion as combined employability factors in the Philippine labor market. The paper's primary contribution is finding that appearance biases persist across age groups, informing the proposed A.S.P.I.R.E. career guidance program for graduates.

## 1. Introduction

The halo effect, a cognitive bias first identified by Thorndike (1920), suggests that the perception of one positive trait – such as physical attractiveness – can disproportionately influence the overall evaluation of an individual's character or

competence. In the context of human resource management, this phenomenon often manifests in hiring decisions where physical desirability overshadows an applicant's intangible qualifications and technical merits. Such subjective prejudices create systemic inequities, particularly in labor markets where traditional stereotypes remain entrenched (Becker, 2025).

In the Philippine socio-cultural landscape, these biases are frequently compounded by concerns regarding skin complexion and gender roles. Despite shifts toward meritocracy, "lookism" and "colorism" continue to persist as significant barriers. Recent scholarship emphasizes that media and digital platforms act as powerful agents in reinforcing these stereotypes, often conflating aesthetic appeal with professional capability (Quicho & Nistal, 2025).

Furthermore, the rise of digital recruitment has introduced new complexities. As employers increasingly leverage social media for background checks, they risk making fragmented judgments based on curated online personas rather than a comprehensive assessment of professional potential (Sharaburyak et al., 2020). Modern research warns that algorithmic and human biases in these digital spaces can exacerbate discrimination, necessitating a more rigorous focus on competency-based hiring frameworks to ensure equitable access to employment (Najeer et al., 2024).

In the Philippine context, the intersection of physical appearance, gender, and employability creates a complex barrier to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality). While SDG 5 aims to end all forms of discrimination against women and girls, the persistent "beauty premium" – often viewed through the lens of the halo effect – frequently imposes an additional layer of scrutiny on female applicants.

Research indicates that gendered expectations in the Philippines are often tied to "aesthetic labor," where women are not only expected to possess technical skills but also to perform a specific standard of femininity. This creates a "double burden" where female candidates may be penalized if they do not adhere to societal beauty standards, or conversely, if their attractiveness is perceived to undermine their perceived intellectual competence.

Current studies highlight these biases are evolving in the modern workforce. Anlacan (2015) argues that in the Philippine service and corporate sectors, recruitment often favors "pleasing personalities," a euphemism that frequently masks biases related to skin tone and gender-conforming appearances. This reinforces the glass ceiling by prioritizing superficial traits over leadership potential. As recruitment shifts to digital spheres, Jiang (2025) found that female applicants are more susceptible to "digital lookism." The research suggested that profile photos on professional networks like LinkedIn can trigger subconscious gender stereotypes more rapidly than traditional text-based resumes, directly impacting interview call-back rates. These prejudices weaken the progress of SDG 5 by creating an unequal playing field. When hiring is influenced by sex roles – such as the preference for males in technical fields like automotive technology – it limits women's economic empowerment and perpetuates occupational segregation (Emeka, 2024).

This study sought to enhance the employability of graduates and refine recruitment strategies within the human resource departments. By specifically examining the physical attractiveness, skin complexion, and sex as determinants of employment, the

research addressed a unique intersection of variables that expanded the existing body of literature within the Philippine socio-cultural context.

The investigation aligned with Article 3 of the Labor Code of the Philippines, which mandates that the State afford protection to labor and promote equal opportunities regardless of sex, race, or creed. By empirically analyzing whether preferences for skin tone or physical appearance dictated hiring outcomes, the study served to uphold these legal and ethical standards, advocating for a more meritocratic recruitment landscape.

Furthermore, the research was anchored in the Naga City Government's mission to bolster social responsibility, progressive governance, and balanced development. The findings contributed to the synthesis of new knowledge by exposing latent personal biases among stakeholders. Ultimately, the study informed both employers and applicants of these dynamics, providing evidence-based strategies to mitigate prejudice and promote equitable access to professional opportunities.

### **1.1. Research Objectives**

The primary objective of this study was to examine the perceived influence of physical attributes and demographic variables on employability within the Philippine labor market. Specifically, the study sought to achieve the following:

- i. profile the respondent cohort in terms of age, sex, and academic department to establish a demographic baseline for the analysis of perception;
- ii. analyze graduate perceptions regarding significance of physical attractiveness, sex roles, and skin complexion across various job types and professional categories;
- iii. evaluate significant differences in perceptions among respondents when grouped according to their demographic profiles (age, sex, and department) to identify potential intra-group biases;
- iv. investigate employer hiring preferences and the degree to which physical appearance, sex and complexion influence recruitment decisions across diverse industries; and
- v. assess the alignment of current hiring practices with the legal mandates of the Labor Code of the Philippines and the strategic goals of SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

## **2. Literature Review**

The impact of physical attributes and gender on employability represents a complex intersection of social psychology, behavioral economics, corporate labor dynamics, and institutionalized bias. In contemporary labor markets, selection mechanisms are theoretically designed to function under strict frameworks of meritocracy, where human capital variables – such as technical expertise, educational attainment, and cognitive capacities – dictate recruitment outcomes. However, substantial empirical literature establishes that non-meritocratic features, specifically physical attractiveness, skin complexion, and gender-role adherence, exert a profound and systemic influence on hiring trajectories.

This literature review synthesizes foundational theoretical paradigms with empirical investigations to explore how physical and demographic traits shape professional mobility, evaluate how these biases manifest across occupational types, and examine contemporary structural shifts in personnel selection.

## 2.1. Theoretical Foundations of Appearance-Based and Demographic Bias

To understand how physical traits alter labor market outcomes, researchers rely on a series of deeply integrated socio-psychological and cognitive frameworks. These theories explain why human decision-makers consistently deviate from objective merit evaluations when presented with visual or demographic cues.

### 2.1.1. *The Halo Effect and Cognitive Saliency*

The conceptual foundation of lookism in organizational psychology is rooted in the Halo Effect, a cognitive bias first formalized by Edward Thorndike (1920). This phenomenon occurs when a decision-maker's holistic impression of an individual is unduly influenced by a single prominent trait. Within the realm of recruitment, aesthetic appeal operates as a highly salient visual cue. When an interviewer evaluates a physically attractive applicant, a subconscious heuristic triggers the automatic attribution of positive secondary characteristics, including high intelligence, social competence, integrity, and operational reliability (Luxen & van de Vijver, 2006).

This bias is structurally reinforced by Implicit Social Cognition Theory (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Implicit social cognition posits that behaviors, evaluations, and personnel selections are guided by unconscious attitudes and deeply ingrained cultural stereotypes. Because human resource practitioners must process large amounts of applicant data under cognitive and temporal constraints, they frequently default to implicit heuristics. Consequently, physical attractiveness functions as an unearned form of social capital, leading to the systematic overvaluation of an individual's actual labor productivity.

### 2.1.2. *The "Lack of Fit" Model and Gender Role Stereotypes*

While appearance-based privileges create an advantage across broad labor categories, these benefits are heavily mediated by structural gender assumptions. Madeline Heilman's (2012) Lack of Fit Model explains how bias emerges from the perceived incongruity between an applicant's demographic attributes (such as sex) and the gendered archetype of a given occupation.

According to this framework, jobs are culturally coded with gendered expectations:

- i. Masculine-coded roles are associated with agentic traits, including physical stamina, dominance, and mathematical or technical problem-solving.
- ii. Feminine-coded roles are associated with communal traits, such as emotional intelligence, nurturing capabilities, and domestic or educational service.

When an applicant's biological sex or perceived gender role diverges from the industry-established occupational stereotype, recruiters anticipate a performance deficit. This cognitive misalignment results in systemic hiring penalties, irrespective of the candidate's objective technical qualifications or verified competency certifications.

### 2.1.3. *The Theory of Aesthetic Labor and the Economic "Beauty Premium"*

In post-industrial, service-dominated economies, physical appearance has shifted from an incidental personal attribute to a commodified commercial asset. The Theory of

Aesthetic Labor conceptualizes the structural processes by which organizations deliberately mandate, monitor, and commodify the physical presentation of their employees to align with corporate brand imagery (Warhurst & Nickson, 2020). Under this framework, physical attractiveness, grooming, and poise are transformed into explicit, though often unwritten, employment competencies.

Daniel Hamermesh and Jeff Biddle's (1994) foundational work on the "Beauty Premium" established the quantitative economic foundations of lookism, proving that highly attractive workers earn a statistically significant wage premium, while less attractive individuals suffer an economic penalty. In contemporary hiring contexts, the premium persists because employers often conflate aesthetic labor with institutional prestige and client-facing performance, institutionalizing lookism as a legitimate market metric.

## **2.2. The Influence of Physical Attractiveness and the "Beauty Premium" Across Professions**

Empirical literature illustrates that the magnitude of the beauty premium is highly variable, dictated entirely by the degree of public exposure and interpersonal engagement required by specific job tasks.

### *2.2.1. Public-Facing and Interpersonal Sectors*

In sectors that require sustained, direct interaction with clients, students, or consumer networks, physical appearance is frequently prioritized as a core occupational asset. Research in educational environments demonstrates that both primary and secondary school teachers face intense aesthetic scrutiny. In these settings, institutional boards and student populations subconsciously link groomed, attractive physical presentation with instructional authority, high pedagogical capability, and emotional stability (Hernández et al., 2013).

Similarly, the service, hospitality, and retail sectors rely heavily on aesthetic labor. For positions such as Customer Service Representatives and Cashiers, corporate recruitment strategies often prioritize a "pleasing personality" – a standard local shorthand for normative physical attractiveness and fair skin (Sarpila et al., 2024). In these professions, the employee's body and face serve as a physical extension of the corporate brand. Recruiters systematically favor highly attractive candidates under the assumption that aesthetic appeal directly drives customer satisfaction, institutional trust, and commercial conversion rates.

### *2.2.2. Technical, Analytical, and Less Client-Facing Roles*

Conversely, the perceived relevance of physical appearance drops sharply within technical, analytical, or labor-intensive occupations. Longitudinal studies tracking hiring outcomes in technical fields – such as Automotive Technology, Digital Animation, Computer Programming, and Mechanical Engineering – indicate that recruitment in these sectors follows a more functionalist, skill-oriented paradigm (Benayoune, 2024). In these disciplines, personnel selection is heavily mediated by verifiable criteria, such as software proficiencies, diagnostic capabilities, and mathematical problem-solving skills. Because the daily responsibilities of a digital animator or automotive mechanic involve data processing and mechanical execution rather than client relations, the cognitive trigger of the halo effect is minimized. Consequently, recruiters are far more

likely to maintain a neutral stance toward an applicant's aesthetic features, focusing instead on objective human capital metrics.

### **2.3. The Pervasiveness of Colorism and Skin Complexion Bias**

While universal facial symmetry and physical grooming are core components of the beauty premium, skin complexion introduces a distinct tier of stratified discrimination known as colorism. Distinct from broad racial categorization, colorism specifically penalizes individuals with darker skin tones while systematically affording professional and social capital to those with lighter skin (Hunter, 2002).

#### *2.3.1. Colonial Mentality and Societal Stratification*

In many post-colonial societies, particularly within Southeast Asia and the Philippines, colorism is a deeply entrenched socio-cultural ideology. Sociological investigations show that centuries of colonial rule established a rigid socioeconomic hierarchy where light skin was directly associated with the ruling elite, intellectual superiority, and exemption from manual labor (Rondilla, 2012). Conversely, darker skin tones became culturally coded as indicators of agricultural work, low socioeconomic status, and marginalized rural origins.

In the modern labor market, this historical stratification manifests as an implicit bias during early-stage resume screening. Although corporate hiring codes explicitly disavow discriminatory practices, implicit association tests confirm that recruiters still subtly associate light skin with elite global professionalism, high intellectual competence, and superior corporate presentation (Daftary et al., 2023).

#### *2.3.2. Unconscious Bias versus Conscious Rejection*

A major paradox in contemporary colorism research is the divergence between conscious social attitudes and actual hiring outcomes. When surveyed, modern university graduates and emerging human resource professionals frequently express a progressive, conscious rejection of skin-tone prejudice, rating skin color as “Not Important” or “Neutral” for professional success. However, audit studies and job-search simulation experiments consistently reveal that when two candidates share identical educational credentials and aptitude scores, lighter-skinned applicants receive significantly higher hiring probabilities and starting salary offers (Abueg et al., 2020).

This discrepancy highlights the operation of Aversive Bias. Recruiters consciously support egalitarian ideals and reject overt discrimination, yet their underlying, unexamined cultural conditioning continues to guide their final selection decisions. This subtle colorism is especially evident in public-facing roles such as bank tellers, frontline hospitality workers, and educational representatives, where light skin is still implicitly treated as a core component of “professional grooming” (Chen & Francis-Tan, 2022).

### **2.4. The Intersectionality of Gender, Academic Discipline, and Aesthetic Pressure**

Personnel selection cannot be understood by analyzing appearance or gender in isolation. Instead, contemporary research relies on Intersectionality Theory to map how gender identity, academic background, and aesthetic pressure converge to create unique patterns of professional disadvantage.

### *2.4.1. Gender Disparities in the “Visual Tax”*

Empirical data consistently reveals a significant gender gap in how the beauty premium is experienced and internalized. Women face substantially higher aesthetic scrutiny than men during the recruitment process, a phenomenon documented as the “Visual Tax” (Santonniccolo et al., 2023). While physical attractiveness acts as a helpful bonus for male applicants, it is frequently treated as an unwritten prerequisite for female candidates. Socio-psychological tracking reveals that female job seekers experience markedly higher levels of interview-related “appearance anxiety,” because they correctly perceive that their physical presentation will be graded as a direct measure of their institutional fit and competence (Spiegel, 2023; Granleese, 2016). This double standard forces female applicants to dedicate disproportionate personal resources to aesthetic management, reinforcing structural gender inequalities within corporate hierarchies.

### *2.4.2. Academic Socialization and Departmental Variances*

The internalization of these lookist standards is heavily influenced by early academic socialization. The educational departments from which students graduate function as cultural incubators, shaping how future professionals view the importance of appearance.

- i. **Education and Human Services Disciplines:** Teacher-preparation programs often feature a strong “hidden curriculum” that emphasizes strict aesthetic presentation, uniform compliance, and conservative grooming standards, framing these elements as essential for classroom authority (Hernández et al., 2013). As a result, graduates from these departments enter the labor market highly attuned to visual standards, viewing physical attractiveness as a foundational component of professional execution.
- ii. **Engineering and Technical Disciplines:** Conversely, STEM fields foster a culture centered on objective task completion, technical diagnostics, and quantitative certifications. Students in these departments are socialized to view human capital as independent of personal aesthetics, resulting in a workforce that places significantly less emphasis on physical appearance during professional evaluations (Oyadiran et al., 2023).

## **2.5. Temporal and Demographical Stability of Workplace Biases**

To design effective institutional interventions, researchers must determine whether appearance-based and gender-related biases are fluid, generational phenomena or structurally stable social constructs.

### *2.5.1. Generational Convergence on Aesthetic Norms*

Analyses measuring hiring perceptions across different age cohorts reveal a surprising level of stability. There are no statistically significant differences between older millennial hiring managers and emerging Gen Z graduates regarding the perceived value of physical attractiveness, traditional sex roles, or skin color in professional settings (Reyes et al., 2023). This lack of age-based variance indicates a Generational Convergence that challenges the common assumption that younger cohorts will automatically discard traditional biases as they enter the workforce.

This stability is largely driven by the homogenizing influence of digital media and algorithmic recruitment platforms. Both younger and older professionals operate within the same media ecosystems, which continuously amplify Eurocentric, lookist, and highly curated definitions of professional presentation (Dimitrov & Kroumpouzou, 2023). Because these aesthetic standards are universally reinforced by digital interfaces, lookist heuristics remain entrenched across the entire age spectrum.

### *2.5.2. Structural Implications for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)*

Because lookist and gendered assumptions are stable across demographics, traditional, age-targeted diversity initiatives are generally ineffective. Contemporary Human Resource management frameworks emphasize that interventions must be systemic and organizational, rather than cohort-specific (ZMG Ward Howell, n.d.).

To eliminate implicit social biases, modern recruitment systems are shifting toward structured institutional designs, including:

- i. **Blind Credentialing:** The removal of names, photographs, and gender markers from initial applications to neutralize early-stage implicit heuristics.
- ii. **Work-Sample Assessments:** Prioritizing standardized portfolio reviews and performance samples to focus evaluator attention entirely on objective output (Siddharth, 2026).
- iii. **Structured Inclusivity Formats:** Eliminating unstructured interview conversations, which are highly susceptible to lookist biases, in favor of standardized rubrics that enforce equity (Ramos, 2026).

## **2.6. Synthesis and Alignment with Global Sustainability Goals**

The collective body of literature indicates that the unmitigated operation of lookism, colorism, and gender stereotyping in recruitment creates a major structural barrier to socioeconomic equity. When organizations base selection decisions on physical presentation, skin tone, or gender archetypes rather than verifiable human capital, they actively undermine merit-based upward mobility.

This systemic failure directly conflicts with international labor standards and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specifically, the persistence of lookist barriers compromises SDG 5 (Gender Equality) by maintaining double standards for female applicants, and violates SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) by denying qualified individuals equitable access to employment based on unalterable physical traits.

To bridge the gap between academic preparation and equitable corporate hiring, institutions must deploy proactive interventions. Universities must equip graduates with strong, competency-based portfolio strategies, while corporate networks must commit to blind, structured, and legally compliant recruitment frameworks. Only by decoupling professional worth from physical traits can modern labor markets transition from superficial aesthetic labor toward true, merit-based productivity.

### **3. Research Methods**

#### **3.1. Research Design**

This undertaking utilized a mixed-method research methodology. A descriptive-correlational research design was used for quantitative data and phenomenological research design using focus group discussion was employed for qualitative data. Furthermore, the researcher used Perceptions of Physical Appearance, Sex, and Skin Complexion Questionnaire which is formulated to determine the perceived factors in employability associated thereto. Research data were collected via completion of a questionnaire which consists of 48 questions related to physical attractiveness, sex and skin complexion and their respective rating based on the different job types and the academic courses offered by the institution. Additionally, qualitative content analysis was used for the data derived in the conduct of focus group discussion. In this manner, researchers found ways to understand the constructs and commonality of experience of human resource officers. The analyzed themes gathered from the contents of the interview responses gave a general characterization of pertinent information such as their preferences for employment and implicit biases.

#### **3.2. Participants and Sampling**

The study was conducted in Naga City, Camarines Sur, Philippines. Naga City was selected because it serves as the commercial, educational, and service hub of the Bicol Region, hosting a concentration of retail, education, hospitality, and technical industries that absorb a large share of local graduates. Bicol State College of Applied Sciences and Technology (BISCAST) was chosen as the source institution because its program offerings in education, engineering, and technical courses correspond directly to the occupational categories examined in the questionnaire. The respondents of this study focused on graduates of Bicol State College of Applied Sciences and Technology (BISCAST). There were 100 respondents randomly selected to answer an online questionnaire regarding employability including factors such as physical attractiveness, skin complexion and sex. The composition was made up of graduates from the year 2015 until the year 2020 who were enrolled in the different courses offered by the institution. There were also 4 participants included in a focus group discussion gathering data on actual experiences regarding hiring and employment, thus strengthening the findings of this study. The participants in the Focus Group Discussion were Human Resource Officers specifically conducting the hiring process within their companies. The validity of results is limited to the graduate's responses. Because of this, the results may only be applied to graduates and students and should not be concluded generally to a variety of the population. The sample size of 100 was set as a practical target based on the accessibility of alumni contact information for graduates from 2015 to 2020. Because no complete and updated registry of all graduates' active contact details was available, the researcher randomly selected respondents from the pool of reachable graduates across the different courses offered by the institution. The sample size is therefore acknowledged as a practical constraint of the study, and the limited generalizability of the results reflects this.

The sampling technique was conducted through random sampling in which the respondents were composed of graduates who enrolled in different courses in the said institution. The researcher distributed an online questionnaire and conducted a focus group discussion to determine the relationship of employability towards the chosen

variables. The focus group discussion followed a semi structured format guided by open ended questions on hiring preferences and recruitment experiences. Sessions were conducted both face to face and virtually, depending on the availability of the participants. With the participants' consent, the virtual sessions were recorded through the online platform, and field notes were taken throughout all sessions to document responses and observations. Each session lasted approximately one hour. To address the ethical aspect of this study, a participant information sheet to inform the participants about the research was distributed as well as an informed consent form to address confidentiality and their willingness to be involved in the study. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Bicol State College of Applied Sciences and Technology Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. 10-12-2020-19) prior to data collection. All survey respondents provided informed consent electronically before accessing the questionnaire, while focus group participants gave their documented consent, including consent to the recording of sessions, before participation. Afterwards, collation, analysis, and interpretation of data were done.

### **3.3. Instrumentation**

Data collection utilized a structured online survey instrument specifically developed for this study to measure the perceived influence of physical attractiveness, sex roles, and skin complexion on employability. The Perceptions of Physical Appearance, Sex, and Skin Complexion Questionnaire consisted of 48 items organized into three thematic sections corresponding to the three independent variables: (1) physical attractiveness, (2) sex roles, and (3) skin complexion. For each section, respondents rated the importance of the respective variable across various job types and academic programs offered by BISCASST using a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Not Important" to "Very Important." The instrument was reviewed for content validity by a panel of experts prior to administration. Face validity was likewise established through a pilot run with a subset of respondents not included in the final sample. The survey was administered online to ensure accessibility for geographically dispersed graduates. All items were adapted in consultation with existing literature on aesthetic labor and employment bias to ensure alignment with the study's conceptual framework. The researcher evaluated the instrument's reliability using Cronbach's alpha, where all constructs yielded coefficients above 0.85, indicating high internal consistency.

### **3.4. Data Analysis**

The statistical treatments used were Frequency and Percentages for the profile of the participants and perception on employability, Mann-Whitney U test for gender difference in perception of physical attractiveness towards employability and Kruskal-Wallis test for the perception of different age groups and course graduated towards employability. All quantitative analyses were performed using jamovi version 2.7. To further validate the study, Qualitative data was also gathered through a focus group discussion, using a field note to code and theme the qualitative data. The qualitative analysis proceeded in the following steps: (1) transcription of the recorded sessions and field notes; (2) repeated reading of the transcripts for familiarization; (3) coding of significant statements related to hiring preferences and biases; (4) grouping of codes into themes; and (5) using the resulting themes to corroborate and contextualize the quantitative findings.

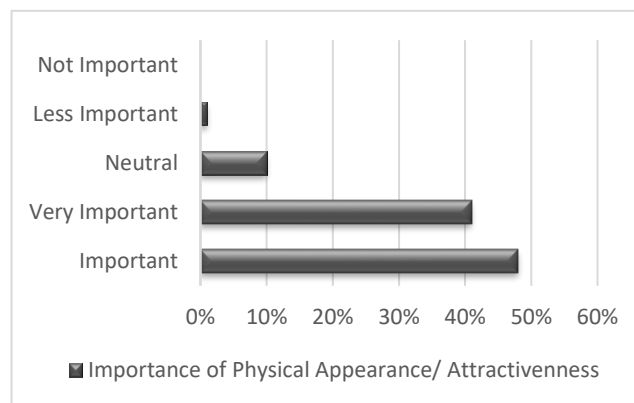
## 4. Results

### 4.1. Perceptions on Significance of Physical Attractiveness, Sex Roles, and Skin Complexion

#### 4.1.1. Physical Appearance

The empirical data indicated a significant consensus regarding the role of physical attributes in employment. Figure 1 displays that an overwhelming 89 percent of respondents categorized attractiveness as either “important” or “very important” for job acquisition. In contrast, 10 percent maintained a neutral stance, while a negligible one percent perceived it as “less important.” The importance of appearance varied significantly across occupational categories. High importance ratings were concentrated in sectors requiring high interpersonal visibility, including Secondary Education (49%, very important); Elementary Education (48%), Customer Service (46%), and Athletic Coaching (46%). Conversely, appearance was deemed less critical in specialized technical fields. Only 13 percent of respondents viewed attractiveness as “Very Important” for Digital Animators/Programmers, and only 12 percent for Automotive Technicians, where “Neutral” responses predominated.

Figure 1: Bar Graph for Importance of Physical Appearance



*“For Customer-facing roles, physical attractiveness might be important in these roles, but for those which require technical skills and problem-solving abilities, physical attractiveness is less significant.” – [Human Resource Officer]*

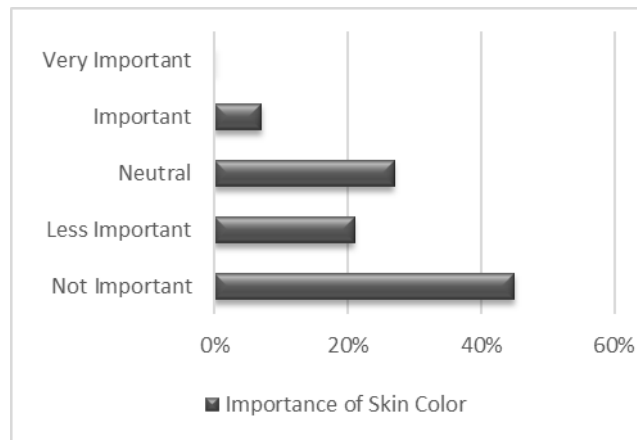
*“If the job requires one to be facing customers just like the applicants we employ, we always consider the physical appearance, especially if they are going to be stationed at products involving skin care or clothing.” – [Human Resource Officer]*

#### 4.1.2. Skin Color

The data indicated that a majority of respondents did not perceive light skin color as a critical factor for employability, as pictured in Figure 2. Specifically, 45 percent of the participants categorized skin tone as “Not Important,” while 27 percent maintained a “Neutral” stance, and 21 percent viewed it as “Less Important.” Notably, only 7 percent

of the respondents deemed it “Important,” and zero percent categorized it a “Very Important.”

Figure 2: Bar Graph for Importance of Skin Color



Despite the general trend, specific occupations exhibited slight variations in perceived importance: For Service and Educational roles, respondents identified a higher relevance for light skin in roles such as Electrical Engineers (17%), Customer Service Representatives (16%), Elementary Teachers (16%), High School Teachers (13%), and Cashier/Tellers (13%). Conversely, for Technical and Manual Roles, skin tone was perceived as least relevant for Automotive Mechanics (4%) and Mechanical Engineers (4%).

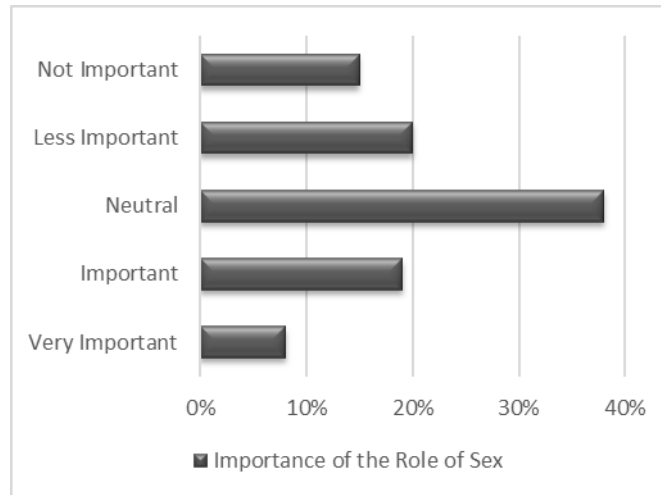
*“For job vacancies that do not require one to entertain customers, skin color is one of the least factors for selecting an applicant but if one would be selling and promoting products for skin lightening, then that would be one factor that we should consider.” - [Human Resource Officer]*

#### 4.1.3. Role of Sex

The study identified the significant persistence of traditional gender-role perceptions within specific occupational categories, alongside a substantial degree of ambivalence among respondents (shown in Figure 3). Across all professions, 38 percent of the participants maintained a “Neutral” stance, representing the most frequent response. Furthermore, 27 percent of the cohort categorized sex as either “Important” or “Very Important” in the context of employability.

Occupational analysis revealed a stark divide based on traditional gender associations. Respondents consistently rated sex as a critical factor for roles such as Automotive Mechanic, where masculine stereotypes predominated. Conversely for roles perceived as gender-neutral or modern – such as digital animation – the importance of sex was rated significantly lower. This distribution suggested that while some sectors were transitioning toward gender neutrality, others remained anchored in historical gender-segregated norms.

Figure 3: Importance of the Role of Sex



*“Certain occupational roles when it comes to gender are still considered in hiring especially if the vacant positions require physical strength and types of products to be sold, for example if the job would require lifting merchandises across stores a male applicant would be favored for the job position.” - [Human Resource Officer]*

*“In most cases, the type of work being masculine or feminine shouldn't be a determining factor in hiring decisions. What's more important is whether the applicant has the necessary skills, qualifications, and experience for the job. Today, women have proven to be equally qualified, competitive and experienced as men.” - [Human Resource Officer]*

**4.2. Gender Difference on the Perceptions of Physical Attractiveness, Sex Roles, and Skin Complexion**

As shown in Table 1, statistical analysis revealed a significant gender-based disparity regarding the perceived importance of physical attractiveness in the recruitment process ( $p = 0.012$ ). Female respondents attributed a higher level of significance to aesthetic appeal, yielding a mean rank of 62.8, whereas their male counterparts produced a significantly lower mean rank of 38.2.

Table 1: Gender differences on the Perceptions of Physical Attractiveness, Sex Roles, and Skin Color.

Variable	Group	Probability ( $p < 0.05$ )
Perceptions of Physical Attractiveness	Female	$P = 0.012^*$
	Male	
Perceptions of Sex Roles	Female	$P = 0.21$
	Male	
Perceptions of Skin Color	Female	$P = 0.45$
	Male	

*\*Significant Gender Difference*

In contrast, the study found no statistically significant differences between genders regarding the perception of sex roles ( $p = 0.21$ ) or skin complexion ( $p = 0.45$ ). These

data suggested that while the valuation of physical appearance remained highly gendered, both male and female graduates maintained relatively homogenous views concerning impact of traditional gender stereotypes and skin color on employability.

*"If we are looking to hire for a "promodizer", we first focus on communication skills, confidence and physical attractiveness" - [Human Resources Officer]*

*"It would really be important for fresh graduates looking for a job to focus first on their relationship/communication skills because there are also many good-looking applicants who really cannot confidently express themselves." - [Human Resources Officer]*

### 4.3. Perceptions of Employability Factors across Discipline

As shown in Table 2, statistical analysis revealed that academic discipline significantly influenced the perceived importance of physical attractiveness ( $\chi^2 = 9.85, df = 3, p = 0.028$ ). Post-hoc testing specifically identified that graduates from the Education department rated physical appearance as a significantly more critical factor for employability compared to those from the Engineering department ( $p = 0.015$ ). The calculated effect size for physical attractiveness ( $\epsilon^2 = 0.1$ ) indicated a small but statistically notable impact of departmental affiliation on these perceptions.

Table 2: Perceptions of employability factors across departments

Variable	Test Statistic	(df)	p-value	Post-Hoc Analysis	Effect Size ( $\epsilon^2$ )
Physical Attractiveness	$\chi^2 = 9.85$	3	0.028	Education vs. Engineering ( $p = 0.015$ )	0.1
Sex Roles	$\chi^2 = 3.12$	3	0.38	No significant differences	negligible
Skin Color	$\chi^2 = 1.75$	3	0.62	No significant differences	negligible

In contrast, the study found no significant differences across departments regarding perceptions of sex roles ( $p = 0.38$ ) or skin color ( $p = 0.62$ ). The effect sizes for these variables remained negligible, suggesting a cross-departmental consensus that skin tone and gender roles were less impactful than physical presentation in the hiring process.

*"Dressing up pleasantly is a plus but it is more important to prepare for interviews highlighting your personality, skills, qualifications and experience since for most of the occupation such as teaching, personal characteristics like work ethic, professionalism and teamwork are more important than physical appearance." - [Human Resource Officer]*

### 4.4. Perceptions of Employability Factors Across Age Groups

Table 3 shows the statistical analysis which demonstrated that age did not exert significant influence on how respondents perceived the importance of physical attributes or gender roles in employment. The study found no statistically significant differences across age group for physical attractiveness ( $\chi^2 = 4.56, p = 0.32$ ), sex roles ( $\chi^2 = 1.89, p = 0.78$ ), or skin color importance ( $\chi^2 = 0.85, p = 0.91$ ).

Furthermore, calculated effect sizes for all three variables remained negligible ( $\epsilon^2$  values of 0.05, 0.02, and 0.01, respectively). These metrics confirmed a high level of consistency across the age spectrum, suggesting that the valuation of aesthetic and demographic factors in the labor market remained uniform regardless of the respondent's generational cohort.

Table 3: Perceptions of Employability Factors Across Age Groups

Variable	Test Statistic	(df)	p-value	Effect Size ( $\epsilon^2$ )
Physical Attractiveness	$\chi^2 = 4.56$	3	0.32	0.05 (Negligible)
Sex Roles	$\chi^2 = 1.89$	3	0.78	0.02 (Negligible)
Skin Color	$\chi^2 = 0.85$	3	0.91	0.01 (Negligible)

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Physical Appearance

The findings confirmed the persistence of the “beauty premium” – a phenomenon where physically attractive individuals receive disproportionate professional advantages. This aligns with the “halo effect” (Thorndike, 1920), wherein aesthetic appeal is subconsciously conflated with professional competence (Luxen & van de Vijver, 2006). While historical data by Hamermesh & Biddle (1994) established the economic foundation of this bias, recent scholarship in the Philippine context suggests that these perceptions are becoming increasingly nuanced. Derous & Van Muylem (2025) posited that in post-pandemic recruitment, the “pleasing personality” requirement has migrated to digital interfaces, where visual cues in virtual interviews continue to trigger subconscious biases in educators and service providers.

Furthermore, the sharp contrast between technical and public-facing roles suggested a utilitarian view of aesthetic labor. As noted by Vivek & Krupskyi (2024), while technical industries are moving toward “blind recruitment” to prioritize skill-based competencies, service-oriented sectors in the Philippines still heavily equate groomed appearances with institutional “brand image.” This systemic preference reinforces the social construct that professional authority, especially in teaching and coaching, is intrinsically linked to physical presentation. This suggests that despite global shifts toward inclusivity, the local labor market remains deeply influenced by traditional aesthetic norms, potentially hindering the progress of merit-based hiring as envisioned by SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

### 5.2. Skin Color

The results suggested a significant departure from traditional societal norms that historically favored light skin in the Philippines. This finding challenged the pervasive nature of colorism, a form of discrimination where lighter skin tones traditionally confer higher social and professional status (Rondilla, 2012). The participants' tendency to label skin color as “Not Important” may have reflected an evolving professional

consciousness or a conscious rejection of aesthetic bias among the new generation of graduates.

However, the slight elevation of importance in public-facing roles hinted at the lingering influence of aesthetic labor. As Hunter (2002) noted, even when individuals consciously reject skin-tone bias, implicit biases often persist in real-world recruitment. Recent studies within the Philippine context support this observation. Vaughan (2024) found that while modern corporate policies explicitly prohibit color-based discrimination, “implicit colorism” still influenced the selection of front-line staff in Manila’s luxury service sectors, where light skin was subtly equated with “global” professionalism.

Furthermore, Tuttle and Critchlow (2025) argued that the rise of high-definition digital recruitment platforms has paradoxically revitalized colorism, as facial-recognition algorithms and digital filters can amplify skin-tone difference during virtual screenings. The fact that respondents in this study still rated skin color as more relevant for teachers and customer service representatives suggests that the “beauty-status” link remains resilient in roles requiring high social visibility. This indicates that while the Philippine labor market has made strides toward inclusivity, the legacy of colonial aesthetic hierarchies still informs the perceived “ideal” candidate in specific professional spheres.

### **5.3. Role of Sex**

The high frequency of neutral responses suggested a complex transition in the Philippine labor market, where graduates may have recognized the ethical imperative of gender equality while simultaneously acknowledging the reality of industry-specific stereotypes. This finding mirrored the observations of Fine (2010) regarding the slow erosion of gender-conforming professional expectations. The data indicated that while the respondents moved away from the overt gender discrimination, they remained hesitant to declare the workplace entirely gender-blind.

Recent scholars contextualized these findings within the Southeast Asian framework. Epetia (2019) observed that in the Philippines, “gendered occupational niches” persisted because of deeply ingrained cultural scripts that associate physical labor with masculinity and care-work with femininity. This study’s results corroborated this, as respondents still prioritized sex roles for technical trades.

Moreover, Gurieva et al. (2022) argued that the “neutrality” found in recent surveys often masks “benevolent sexism” or a pragmatic recognition of glass ceilings that still exist in male-dominated industries like automotive technology and engineering. The participants’ perceptions suggested that while progress toward SDG 5 (Gender Equality) was evident, traditional archetypes continued to exert a latent influence on how “ideal” candidates were envisioned for employment. Addressing this requires not just hiring policies, but underlying societal perceptions of “masculine” and “feminine” competence.

### **5.4. Gender Difference Perceptions**

The findings indicated that female graduates perceived a higher degree of “aesthetic pressure” within the professional sphere, suggesting that women may internalize the “beauty premium” as a more critical determinant of their career success than men. This discrepancy corroborated the theories of Dovidio and Gaertner (2000) regarding subtle

biases that disproportionately affect marginalized or scrutinized groups. Within the Philippine context, this gendered valuation of appearance likely stemmed from societal expectations where professional “grooming” is often more strictly enforced for women. Recent research supported this trend, noting that female job seekers in Southeast Asian urban centers reported higher levels of “appearance anxiety” during interviews, perceiving their physical presentation as a direct proxy for their competence (Blanchard-Emmerson, 2024; Prieler & Centeno, 2013). This “double standard” in aesthetic labor suggests that while the labor market is theoretically moving toward meritocracy, women feel compelled to navigate a landscape where their visual appeal serves as a critical credential.

Conversely, the lack of significant gender differences regarding sex roles and skin color pointed toward a stabilizing cultural shift. The modern Philippine educational system has successfully integrated SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality) frameworks, leading to a more unified, egalitarian view of professional roles among young graduates regardless of their gender (Lopez et al., 2024; Reyes et al., 2021). However, the persistent focus on appearance among women highlights a latent bias that continues to threaten equitable employment. The “visual tax” paid by female applicants remains a significant barrier to achieving a truly inclusive workforce, necessitating HR interventions that prioritize blind recruitment and competency-based evaluations (Rapanot et al., 2021; Neri, 2018; Lick & Johnson, 2014).

### **5.5. Perceptions of Employability Factors across Discipline**

The disparity in perceptions between Education and Engineering graduates suggested that academic environments and professional socialization played a critical role in shaping biases. Education graduates likely emphasized physical attractiveness due to the “role model” expectation inherent in teaching, where appearance is often conflated with professionalism and authority. This aligned with the findings of Heilman (2012), which argued that “lack of fit” models often penalize individuals in professions where aesthetic standards are culturally embedded.

Recent studies reinforce the idea that specific disciplines act as incubators for professional stereotypes. Giray et al. (2023) observed that “pedagogical grooming” – the expectation that educators must maintain a specific visual standard – remains a dominant hidden curriculum in Philippine teacher-education institutions. This contrasted sharply with the Engineering sector, where recruitment increasingly prioritizes technical certifications and “hard skills” over aesthetic presentation, reflecting a more functionalist approach to employability (Junejo, 2025; Maunsell-Terry & Taskin, 2023).

Furthermore, the lack of departmental variation regarding skin color and sex roles suggested that broader societal shifts toward inclusivity have successfully permeated various academic fields. However, the departmental sensitivity toward appearance indicates that “lookism” remains a localized challenge. As Jones et al. (2024) argued, until academic departments actively deconstruct the link between aesthetic presentation and professional competence, graduates in service-oriented fields like education will continue to navigate a labor market that prioritizes visual cues over pedagogical merit, potentially hindering the progress of SDG 4 (Quality Education).

## 5.6. Perceptions of Employability Factors across Age Groups

The lack of age-based variance suggested that the “beauty premium” and gendered professional expectations functioned as stable societal norms that transcended generational divides. This stability indicated that younger and older participants shared a collective understanding of the professional landscape, likely reinforced by persistent cultural scripts. These findings aligned with the foundational work of Greenwald and Banaji (1995) regarding implicit social cognition, which posits that shared cultural biases often operate independently of individual demographic factors like age.

Recent studies explore why these perceptions remain static across generations. The ubiquity of social media and digital marketing in the Philippines has created a “homogenized aesthetic standard,” where both Gen Z and older millennials are exposed to the same visual hierarchies, thereby narrowing the generational gap in perception (Hussain et al., 2025). Consequently, the “pleasing personality” requirement remains a universally recognized, albeit subjective, benchmark for employability.

Furthermore, traditional employment values are often passed down through institutionalized “career readiness” narratives, which continue to emphasize physical presentation as a form of professional respect (Ravid et al., 2025). This suggests that biases related to appearance and sex are not merely “generational relics” that will fade with time; rather, they are deeply embedded in the contemporary organizational culture. For HR practitioners and policy makers, these results imply that diversity and inclusion training should be implemented as a broad, organizational-wide strategy rather than age-specific interventions, as the underlying biases appear to be culturally systemic rather than cohort-specific.

## 5.7. Proposed Career Guidance Program: A.S.P.I.R.E. (Authentic Self Program for Inclusive Recruitment & Employment)

### 5.7.1. Resume and Portfolio Building

The Center for Guidance and Mental Health Services of the institution will spearhead a seminar-workshop for the graduating students to mitigate the impact of aesthetic bias during recruitment. By pivoting toward competency-based narratives, the program trains students to structure resumes and digital portfolios that prioritize educational milestones, technical certifications, and evidence of professional skills over traditional demographic markers. This intervention aligns with the findings of Aamodt (2019), who demonstrated that work-related evidence significantly reduces the subjectivity of hiring decisions and neutralizes the subconscious “halo effect.”

Recent studies support this transition toward “blind” credentialing as a vital tool for equity. Vivek and Krupskiy (2024) found that prioritizing project-based portfolios over personal photographs increased hiring diversity in the Philippine tech sector, while Newman and Schwarz (2024) noted that providing recruiters with tangible work samples reduced the time spent scrutinizing applicant photos by 40 percent. By equipping graduates with these tools, the institution fosters a meritocratic professional identity that directly supports SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and challenges the systemic reliance on aesthetic labor in the local economy.

### 5.7.2. *Advocating Oneself*

The Center will initiate an interview simulation workshop designed to equip graduating students with the psychological and rhetorical tools necessary to navigate biased recruitment landscapes. By practicing in a safe, inclusive environment, participants will master strategies for handling “challenging questions” and neutralizing inappropriate inquiries related to physical attributes or sex. This intervention aligns with the seminal findings of McDaniel et al. (1994), which advocate for structured interview formats as superior, high-validity methods for reducing subjective prejudice. By preparing students for structured environments while simultaneously training them to redirect unstructured, biased questioning, the workshop fosters a more resilient and professional applicant pool.

Furthermore, the program includes a critical legal literacy component titled “Advocating for Oneself,” which educates students on their rights under Philippine anti-discrimination statutes and the Labor Code. This curriculum is supported by Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly (2006), who emphasized that legal awareness is a fundamental prerequisite for opposing workplace bias. A recent study reinforces this, noting that in the Philippine context, graduates who understand their labor rights are significantly more likely to report and resist “aesthetic labor” demands (Llorens et al., 2021). Additionally, simulation-based training reduces “appearance anxiety” among female applicants, allowing them to project technical competence more effectively despite persistent societal stereotypes (Spiegel, 2023).

### 5.7.3. *Equitable Hiring*

To foster a more equitable labor market in Naga City, the Center, in collaboration with the Career and Placement Office, will implement a specialized bias-mitigation program for human resource practitioners. This training focuses on the adoption of inclusive recruitment frameworks that prioritize technical qualifications over aesthetic or demographic variables. A primary component involves the deconstruction of job descriptions to eliminate “gendered wording” – terms that subconsciously signal a preference for masculine or feminine traits – which Gaucher, Friesen, and Kay (2011) identified as a significant barrier to workplace diversity.

Recent studies emphasize that contemporary HR training must also address “digital colorism” and “algorithm bias” prevalent in modern recruitment platforms. Wan (2023) observed that HR practitioners who underwent “linguistic inclusivity training” saw a 22 percent increase in applicant diversity for traditionally gender-segregated roles. Furthermore, Lenasri and Shekhar (2025) highlighted that practitioners must be sensitized to the “name-bias” phenomenon, where ethnic or regional identifiers trigger unconscious prejudices. By integrating these recent findings, the training equips HR professionals with strategies to expand their sourcing channels and utilize neutral language, thereby ensuring that recruitment practices align with the social responsibility goals of the local government and SDG 5 (Gender Equality).

## 6. Conclusion

The study concluded that a pervasive “beauty premium” continues to define the landscape of employability within the local labor market, suggesting that the halo effect remains a potent, albeit informal, credential. While technical proficiency is objectively

valued in specialized fields, the research found that in professions centered on human interaction, physical appearance often functions as a proxy for professional competence. This persistent reliance on aesthetic appeal indicates that “lookism” is not merely an isolated preference but a structural bias that challenges the meritocratic ideals of the modern workforce.

The investigation further revealed that these aesthetic pressures are significantly gendered and discipline specific. The heightened importance placed on appearance by female graduates reflects a “double burden” where professional success is perceived to be inextricably linked to visual presentation. Furthermore, the variation in perceptions across academic departments suggests that educational environments and professional socialization play a critical role in either reinforcing or mitigating these biases. This highlights a disconnect between the classroom and the workplace, where pedagogical or technical merit may be undermined by traditional social scripts.

While the study noted a collective shift toward neutrality regarding skin complexion and sex roles, this trend likely signifies a “conscious rejection” of overt discrimination rather than the total eradication of implicit bias. The stability of these views across age groups suggests that these perceptions are deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of the regional labor market, transcending generational shifts.

In summary, the findings underscored that despite legal frameworks and global initiatives like SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), appearance-based prejudices persist as a barrier to equitable employment. The study concludes that moving toward a truly inclusive labor market requires more than just policy changes; it necessitates a fundamental cultural shift within both educational institutions and human resource departments. By prioritizing competency-based hiring and fostering a strong sense of professional self-worth in graduates, stakeholders can work toward a future where an individual’s potential is defined by their skills rather than their physical attributes.

## **7. Recommendation**

The study recommended that in order to finalize an institutional strategy, the Center for Guidance and Mental Health Services, in partnership with the Career Placement Office, should implement a multi-tiered intervention program to dismantle appearance-based and gendered biases in the local labor market, the proposed A.S.P.I.R.E. The institution may launch a series of competency-focused workshops for graduating students, where participants will master the art of constructing evidence-based portfolio and practicing structured interview techniques. These simulations will empower students to redirect subjective inquiries toward their technical achievements, ensuring that their professional merit remains the focal point of every recruitment interaction. Furthermore, the Center must provide explicit training on labor rights and anti-discrimination statutes, equipping graduates with the legal literacy necessary to advocate for themselves in the face of systemic prejudice.

Simultaneously, the College must extend its influence to the corporate sector by conducting bias-mitigation seminars for Human Resource practitioners and local employers. These sessions will guide recruiters in auditing their job descriptions for gendered language and implementing “blind” screening processes that prioritize skills over aesthetic markers. By fostering this dual approach – empowering the applicant

while educating the employer – the institution will cultivate a more equitable professional ecosystem in Naga City. This collaborative framework will effectively bridge the gap between academic preparation and inclusive employment, ensuring that technical expertise and character become the primary currency for career success.

### **Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate**

This study was conducted in strict accordance with the ethical standards of Bicol State College of Applied Sciences and Technology Research Ethics Committee. Formal ethical approval was obtained prior to the commencement of data collection. All participants – comprising BISCASST graduates and Human Resource Officers who participated in the online questionnaire and focus group discussion – were provided with a clear and comprehensive Informed Consent Form via the digital survey platform. This document detailed the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Participants provided their explicit consent electronically before accessing the survey instruments. To ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of all respondents, no personally identifiable information (PII) was collected. All data were encrypted and stored in a secure, password-protected database accessible only to the primary researcher, in compliance with the Philippine Data Privacy Act of 2012 (RA 10173). Upon completion of the statistical analysis, the raw data were handled according to the institution's data retention and disposal policy to prevent unauthorized access.

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The author declares there are no competing interests.

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